

The "Clap"

On the exact day of my 18th birthday I got confirmation that I had gonorrhea. I guess it's true that time heals all wounds, because at that moment I was mortified with embarrassment and didn't tell anyone for decades. Thankfully, I can look back now and find it amusing.

For a young man, testosterone can be an evil taskmaster. It envelops us with a desire for copulation that is relentless, unconscious and largely beyond our control. The frontal, more evolved part of our brain, has feelings of tenderness, love and commitment, but it's the older, primal brain that rules our desires. From its point of view, we have but one function: to spread our seed far and wide, and as often as possible. For this duty, I was its willing servant. Or at least I wanted to be.

By the beginning of my senior year in high school, I had many close calls and a couple of experiences which could technically be termed intercourse, but not compared to what was yet to come, so to speak. There was lots of furtive fumbling, groping, grinding, yearning and learning ... and embarrassment. I have one very distinct memory of a standing, passionate kiss during a first date with a girl who had very active hips. Without any warning, I felt an explosion in my jeans and a quick feeling of warm wetness. Filled with embarrassment, I escaped without her knowing.

My first real sexual experience was, thankfully, a good one for both of us, and the wonderful relationship lasted my entire senior year of high school. It started off with a bang, so to speak.

Maryanne and I had a budding prepubescent relationship years prior, when we would meet at the Princess Theatre in downtown Mount Dora for an afternoon movie, sit in the back and kiss. Although a year younger, she knew what she wanted, and would take my hand and place it directly on a very small, but growing, breast. I felt as if I was in heaven. My hand was only on top of what could hardly be considered as a bra, flimsy and empty as it was, but still, it was a start.

A few years passed before we met again at the beginning of my senior year in 1974. A friend was having a big party at a house on a lake and there was alcohol. We met, we kissed, and our bodies, much more developed now, remembered. Her bra, fuller. My pants, tighter. There was a small, separate guest house that looked promising. The door was open, but darn, there was a friend with a date on the couch. Where else to go? The only space available was the kitchen. On the floor. Maybe a pillow. Shorts came off, and what ensued was the final bursting forth of years of lewd thoughts and missed opportunities. When I think back on it, it's amazing what (and how much!) a horny 17-year-old boy can do when that ancient part of his brain convinces him this may be the only chance he'll ever have for the rest of his life.

Fortunately, for both of our raging hormones, the relationship continued and we would often meet after school, upstairs in my bedroom to "study". That's what I told my parents anyway, and whether they knew what was going on or not, they never bothered us behind that locked door.

As I see it, there are only two potential downfalls to consensual teenage sex: pregnancy and disease. We never used prophylactic protection because I thought neither of these scenarios was a problem. I took her word for it that she was on the pill, and luckily that was true. I assumed we were both monogamous, but I was mistaken.

After several months of these pleasant afternoon trysts, and just days before my birthday in early December, I noticed a slight burning sensation when urinating. I remembered from health class that this was a possible symptom of gonorrhea, but since that was impossible, I just tried to ignore it. That didn't work. Who could I trust to tell and how could I figure out for sure what was going on? In a perfect world I would've felt comfortable telling my parents, but that would mean admitting, and probably putting a stop, to our afternoon "studying". I had never been to our family doctor without my mom, and the potential embarrassment seemed overwhelming.

In a panic, I chose to tell the coolest adult I could think of, my chemistry teacher. Mr. Spaulding was young-ish, fun and different from every other teacher at Mount Dora high school. As it turns out, that difference was that he was gay, but I didn't really know anything about that then. (It's difficult to believe looking back on it now, but it was 1974 in central Florida, and my knowledge of human sexuality, other than my own, was extremely limited.) Mr. Spaulding also seemed like a guy who could keep a secret and would also have enough scientific knowledge to confirm my self-diagnosis. He assured me that I was going to live, that my secret was safe, but that he needed to have a "sample" to put under the microscope to be sure. Into a closet I went, by myself, pants down, glass microscope slide in hand. Whatever he saw under magnification indicated I needed a shot of penicillin, and quickly.

Getting used to embarrassment by now, I swallowed my pride and walked the few blocks to our family doctor on a main street in my tiny hometown. Dr. Montgomery was an institution in Mount Dora; the school football team doctor, constantly on the sidelines in his plaid shirt, smoking a cigar at every home football game. He had delivered me, to the day, 18 years earlier. I guess my parents and two other brothers were hoping for a girl, because at that moment he supposedly exclaimed, proudly, "it's a girl... No dammit, it's a boy". I doubt that's true, but it was an ongoing family joke and the source of some penis-size innuendo in our family. He was with me for every little malady up to that point, including making a house call with that big black satchel that opened in the middle when I had the mumps. He was also a close friend of my parents. It was a small town.

So there I was, the day of my 18th birthday, ready to walk up the few stairs into his office on Fourth Avenue, when the door opens and out walks Dr. Montgomery. I was mortified, humiliated, and embarrassed, and he must've seen all of that on my face because all he said was, "Come on in, son". He gave me the required shot, and as far as I know, he never told a soul.

That left one thing: a very awkward conversation with my girlfriend.

